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Graduates of Color Distinguish Themselves

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Graduates of color distinguish themselves

Dean Makau W. Mutua has said it repeatedly and emphatically: SUNY Buffalo Law School must “look like America.” The goal is simple but never easy – to identify and recruit academically promising students and accomplished faculty of color, and to take advantage of the cultural and academic richness that a diverse population provides.

Long the province of white men, the law as a profession has made great strides toward equal access (though it’s widely recognized that the job remains unfinished). And the Law School continues to do its part to make the Bar more diverse, both in Western New York and in the national and global settings where its alumni practice.

Lillie V. Wiley-Upshaw, vice dean for admissions and financial aid, has been instrumental in fostering diversity at the school, and her many recruiting trips to undergraduate colleges include reaching out to potential minority law students.

That effort got a major boost this summer, when 20 academically promising college students spent a month at SUNY Buffalo Law School as part of the LSAC DiscoverLaw.org Prelaw Undergraduate Scholars Program. (See the article on Page 31.)

Today, nearly one in five members of each incoming class are members of racial or ethnic minority groups. They benefit

from a number of initiatives designed to support their study, including scholarship support. One major player has been the Buffalo law firm Phillips Lytle, which for more than 15 years has supported minority students at the Law School with a scholarship program that many say has made it possible for them to enroll.

Graduates of color have distinguished themselves in every echelon of law. A sampling of some of the best-known and most successful includes:

J. Mason Davis Jr. ’59 was the first African-American to practice as a senior partner with a major Alabama law firm, Sirote & Permutt in

Birmingham. An Alabama native, he had to come north to Buffalo for law school because African-Americans were denied entrance to all of the schools of the University of Alabama system. His early cases included defending lunch counter sit-in protesters for racial integration, employment discrimination and more than 100 voter discrimination matters.

Hon. Samuel L. Green ’67 has just retired after serving as a justice of the state Supreme Court Appellate Division, Fourth Department, for 28 years. Following graduation, he was in private practice for five years and served on the Buffalo

City Court before ascending to the Supreme Court. “It’s been a great run,” he said in reflection. “I’ve enjoyed every moment of it.”

Hon. Hugh B. Scott ’74 is magistrate judge for the U.S. District Court, Western District of New York. Scott was the first African-American to become assistant attorney general in charge in Western New York, as well as the first African-American to become assistant U.S. Attorney, assistant corporation counsel and assistant county attorney. Scott was elected to Buffalo City Court at age 32, then re-elected to another 10-year term before leaving the position to be-

come the first African-American to sit on the federal bench in the Western District of New York. He also serves as an adjunct professor at the Law School.

A road of legal scholarship and practice that began at SUNY Buffalo Law School led **Julio M. Fuentes ’75** to the second-highest court in the nation. When President Bill Clinton in 2000 appointed him to the U.S. Court of Appeals, 3rd Circuit, Fuentes became the Law School’s highest-ranking federal jurist. He had been a judge on New Jersey’s Superior Court bench in Essex County since 1987; served as a municipal court judge; and previously practiced civil and criminal law in New Jersey.

Brent L. Wilson ’76 is a partner in the Atlanta law firm Elarbee, Thompson, Saap & Wilson. He devotes his practice to defending employers in em-



Margaret W.
Wong '76



Michael A.
Battle '81



Joseph M.
Hanna '05



J. Mason
Davis Jr. '59



Brent L.
Wilson '76



Julio M.
Fuentes '75

ployment-related litigation matters, and counseling employers regarding day-to-day employment decisions to avoid litigation. He works with a variety of employers nationwide, including communications companies, service providers, educational institutions, non-profit groups, public entities and manufacturing operations.

Margaret W. Wong '76 was born in Hong Kong and came to the United States on a student visa. A full scholarship to SUNY Buffalo Law School, she says, made her dream of becoming a lawyer possible. Starting with a \$25 desk and doing her own secretarial work, she built Margaret Wong & Associates, an immigration law powerhouse in Cleveland. The firm now has additional offices in Chicago, New York City, Columbus, Atlanta and Detroit, serving both individual and

corporate clients throughout the United States. Wong has served on the Dean's Advisory Council since 2006.

As chief executive of SBLI USA, **Vikki L. Pryor '78** engineered a dramatic turnaround for the New York City-based mutual life insurance company. Under her leadership, the company became a diversified national financial services firm operating in 49 states and serving about 300,000 customers. She was the first African-American woman to head a U.S. insurance company. Her new initiative, the Change Create Transform Foundation, has as its goal "fostering change by unleashing and nurturing human potential."

Appointed by President George W. Bush, **Michael A. Battle '81** formerly directed the Executive Office for United States Attorneys at the Department of Justice.

Previously, he served as U.S. Attorney for the Western District of New York. He also has served as a judge in Erie County Family Court; as assistant in charge of the Buffalo office of the New York State attorney general; as a federal public defender and assistant U.S. Attorney; and as a staff attorney with the Legal Aid Society Civil Division. He is now in private practice with the New York City firm Schlam Stone & Dolan.

Mark K. Suzumoto '82 is a founder of Van Etten Suzumoto & Sipprelle, with offices in Westlake Village, Calif., and Los Angeles. He focuses his practice on consumer product counseling and regulatory compliance, including business and litigation advice on intellectual property, products liability and trade regulation issues. A longtime donor to the Law School and recent co-chair of the Annual

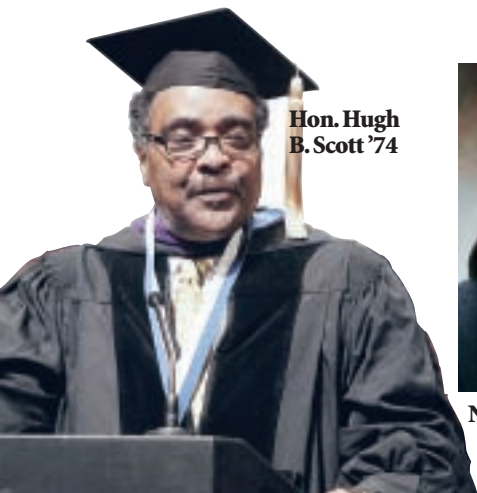
Fund campaign, he has served as a member of the Dean's Advisory Council since 2000. He is also a longtime supporter of the Boy Scouts, serving on the Executive Council of the organization's Ventura County Council since 2002.

Nicole C. Lee '02 serves as executive director of TransAfrica Forum, the nation's oldest African-American advocacy organization for justice in Africa and the Diaspora. She oversees the organization's human rights and advocacy work relating to Africa and other worldwide locations where people of African descent have settled in large numbers, including Europe, the Caribbean and South America. She is also responsible for administration, fundraising and financial management.

Alumnus **Joseph M. Hanna '05**, a partner practicing com-

mercial litigation with the Buffalo law firm Goldberg Segalla, has committed energy and enthusiasm toward promoting diversity in the legal profession as well. As president of the Minority Bar Association of Western New York, he spearheaded a clerkship program that places minority students into positions with criminal, civil and family court judges. Hanna also organizes and chairs Success in the City, a diversity networking event.

And once they're enrolled, minority students find that the Asian American, Black and Latin American law students associations are a strong presence in the school, providing support and socialization.



Hon. Hugh
B. Scott '74



Nicole C. Lee '02



Hon. Samuel L.
Green '67



Vikki L.
Pryor '78



Mark Suzumoto '82